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Chapter 2

The Setting

131 ALOR is a small and obscure island in the Netherlands East Indies. It lies directly north of central Timor at the end of that long string of land fragments called the Lesser Sundas. More specifically, it is 8 degrees south of the equator and between 124 degrees and 125 degrees longitude east of Greenwich. This places it about halfway between Java and New Guinea in an east-west line and about halfway between Australia and Celebes in a north-south line.

132 Alor's climate and vegetation reflect its proximity to the Australian land mass. There are prevailing southeast and northwest winds, with severe monsoon storms as the winds change. The wet season begins with a few thunder showers at the end of October, then works up to a crescendo in January, February, and March, when rains fall in a steady downpour each afternoon, sending spates rushing down the deeply 221 gouged river canyons. This is the period of planting and intensive weeding.

[132] With the gradual cessation of the rains the temperature falls slightly, and as the rainy season ends, first corn, then rice and beans are harvested. Later still comes the sweet potato season. By the end of the dry season the whole countryside is brown and parched, and finally many of the springs and small rivers dry up. The only important crop of this period is cassava. At this time natives burn over the land to destroy the weeds they have been cutting in their fields and to drive wild pig for communal hunts. Little survives the annual burning-over except eucalyptus trees and a kind of blady grass known throughout the Indies as 137 alang alang.

Alor is therefore not lush jungle country. Rich tropical growth is found only in the ravines where there is moisture the year round and where the land is too steep for cultivation—and to natives, land too steep for cultivation means nothing short of the perpendicular.

133 The terrain is so precipitous that one drops easily into accepting it 184 as an explanation for the remarkable diversity of language and culture on this small island. Alor is only about fifty miles long and thirty wide, but it supports a native population of approximately seventy thousand, [147] who speak innumerable dialects of at least eight different languages. 101 Abui is the name given the language of the area from which most of the subsequent descriptive data were drawn. It is fifty miles from the

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ances that throughout Indonesia is the concept of man's creation from molded clay. In Atimelang this widespread motif is altered so that man is created from molded rice and corn meal; that is, man is made from food.

Also food, rather than native currencies, is generally considered adequate pay for labor. The guest-workers who help cultivate a large rice field, who assist in erecting a lineage house who attend memorial funeral ceremonies, or who participate in similar ceremonial activities are all fed in return for their participation. When cooperative groups are formed for work in fields, the host of the day must furnish the midday meal.

There are other attitudes toward food which are perhaps less dramatic and institutionalized, but just as telling. If women are pounding rice or corn, any kernel which falls from the mortar is carefully picked up. Children of five or six have already absorbed this attitude and are as meticulous as the adults of both sexes. A single bean left in a pod during shelling will be retrieved by children as well as adults. In clearing ground even isolated food plants will be carefully preserved. The meticulous fashion in which all food articles are saved and used does not coincide with any actual scarcity.

The natives also refer frequently to the annual "hungry period." This is the end of the dry season when there is no actual want but only less of the preferred foods. For a month or two natives depend more on cassava and sweet potatoes than on corn. Yet the culture phrases this as a period of food stress. In addition there were references to periods of famine as though they were an ever present threat. Careful inquiry revealed only two periods of shortage within the memories of people between forty and fifty. Both of these were due to factors which had disorganized the community so that for one season the fields had not been as extensively planted and as carefully weeded as is customary. There is no doubt that food, especially of the preferred sort, was scarce on these two occasions, but it was procurable by purchase in nearby communities and there is no evidence that anyone died of hunger. There is, in fact, no indication that hunger is ever necessary if a proper amount of foresight and industry has been exercised. Perhaps one of the best indications that the concern over food scarcity is of psychological origin and not realistic is that there is no land hunger. No one ever expresses poverty or wealth in terms of land, although there is actually great variation between consumption units in the number and fertility of fields owned. This is so despite a strong preoccupation with wealth as status in the culture. Data on the yield of the fields indicate that crops are good and on the whole adequate not only to feed the consumption units but also to provide surpluses for contributions to feasts.

In addition there is a singular agricultural fiction in Alor. This concerns the so-called "good years" and "rat years" which come in alternate seasons. Theory has it that there is no use planting rice fields or any outlying plots during "rat years" because rodents will eat up the crop before it can be harvested. In the "good years" there are supposed to be fewer rats and there is a chance to lay in surpluses for large feasts. The theory of alternating years of rat plagues has no basis in reality. Essentially the idea is a fiction that every other year you are the helpless victim of depredations on your food supply. As one might expect, there are

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a few people who ignore the theory and plant extra corn fields or even occasional rice fields during "rat years." Yet the social fiction seems almost a rationalization of basic food attitudes in the individual. It appears to be almost an expression of infantile deprivation and helplessness. However, it is only with the utmost caution that I would suggest in any particular case that individual psychology is the direct source of an institutionalized form.

Theft and fear of theft are ramified phenomena whose implications extend beyond their application to food, but the most common type of theft is from gardens. This may be explained on two bases: one is the early theft habits of foraging play groups of boys; the other is that food is one of the few types of property which cannot be absolutely identified and which can be used without much fear of detection. For these reasons, perhaps, one sees the use of curses against theft erected most frequently in fields. These curses, made by specialists, are bamboo poles into whose cleft top are inserted the necessary combinations of magical objects. They are erected in fields where theft has occurred or where the owner fears such an occurrence. Once there, they are supposed to work automatically. A thief would develop leprosy or some other fatal or debilitating illness, and even the owner should call the specialist to remove the curse before harvesting the field. Although these curses are widely used, they seem actually to engender very little fear among most people. Certainly they in no way effectively stop pilfering. Many people are more realistic in the face of depredations and keep armed guard on their fields. A thief caught in the act runs the risk not only of having to pay a fine but also of being shot.

Another important food attitude is shown by the limited range of generosity in distributing it. An occasional guest is fed, but soon enough anyone who is obviously sponging is no longer asked to eat. In case a family runs short of corn or rice it has to buy or borrow from those who may have a surplus. But if food is borrowed, it is at rates of interest running as high as one hundred percent. This holds even between brothers. Thus Panseni wanted a hundred-ear corn bundle. He got it from his brother but had to repay it at harvest time with two corn bundles of the same size. Even feasts, which at first blush appear to be generous food distributions, are far from lavish in actuality. Each female guest brings to the feast a contribution of food. Everything brought by guests is pooled with the hosts' contributions and then redistributed so that women may carry back home but little more than they brought in the first place. Of course they do receive meat in addition, but most often the meat consists of only three or four cubes of boiled pork about two inches square. However, the quantities displayed are considerable and the hosts derive satisfaction therefrom.

I have been concerned with describing a series of childhood experiences and a series of institutionalized adult food attitudes. The experiences of individual children with respect to hunger gratifications and disciplines vary greatly; it is to be expected, therefore, that in adults these cultural attitudes toward food will vary in "the depth or shallowness of meaning in the individual's total economy." Mangma began his autobiography with early memories of a period of hunger, whereas Tilapada, who was the same age and of the same village, began the story of her childhood with quarrels between herself and other children.